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Matthew Parris My Week

2011, Week 1, and the best is already in the past

After the battle and the storm Othello, beholding his Desdemona, confesses that "... If it were now to die, / 'Twere now to be most happy; for I fear/ My soul hath her content so absolute/ That not another comfort like to this/ Succeeds in unknown fate..."

There are moments so perfect you wish time could stop. On only the second day of 2011 I experienced one. I was on a rock, on the edge of a cliff, at the very tip of a long sandstone ridge elevated thousands of feet above a landscape of canyons and valleys, rock pinnacles and red-rock walls, all iced in powdery snow. You could see a hundred miles.

They call it the Island in the Sky. It was stunning.

We were in the Canyonlands National Park in Colorado. Nobody else seemed to be. The sky was cloudless blue; the sun glowed a cold, bright yellow; forests of stunted juniper stretched away stiff-limbed in the intense cold as the thermometer hovered around -20C. Frozen air wafting up past my feet glittered with a thousand tiny points of refracted light: ice crystals suspended in the wind.

We sat, all four of us, wordless for half an hour before sunset, rooted to the spot, breathless with adoration. Each of us felt this, and guessed that the others felt it too. Only 40 hours into the new year and yet it was possible to say with total assurance that there will be no more perfect

day to be in this place, at this time, in all the days yet to come.

To boldly go ...

Anyone wanting to explore America's amazing national parks, who is unafraid of icy roads, finds winter beautiful and prefers to avoid the crowds, should consider what may seem an unlikely proposition: fly out to the southwestern Rocky Mountain states of the United States in mid-winter.

Hire a big 4x4 and set forth with nothing (beyond your usual clothes and equipment) but the warmest hat, scarf, socks, gloves, boots,

long johns and down jacket — and mobile phone, map and credit card.

Large parts of most of the parks remain open; visitor numbers are a fraction of the summer season; hotels, cabins and holiday cottages all have vacancies and low-season rates, and you can plan and make your reservations over breakfast. In three days — and rubbing shoulders with just a handful of other tourists — I've seen the natural wonders of the Arches National Park, walked through the snow to stunning views in the Canyonlands National Park, both in Utah, and gone on to see (in the Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado) the stupendous 13th-century villages inside vast open caves built by the Pueblo Indian peoples.

Thence into New Mexico, via the biggest hot spring in the world, where you bathe outdoors in more than 20 different pools at different temperatures, ice and snow crackling

around you. All these places, I'm told, can be gridlocked with holidaymakers from spring onwards. This week we've experienced them as though they had opened their gates for us alone.

Grown-ups welcome

I'm impressed, too, with the robust attitude that public and tourist authorities in the American South West seem to take towards visitor risk.

Where in Britain the police would be advising people not to venture outdoors unless it was absolutely necessary, here you are left to work

out for yourself that snowy roads are slippery. "Don't come unless you're fit, and take care on the ice," was all the warning we got (or needed) from our guide, before slithering down a steep path in Mesa Verde, then climbing through holes in the ground down long wooden ladders into the weird subterranean chambers that the Pueblo Indians excavated for living rooms.

Any one of scores of natural and man-made wonders that we've seen this week would in Britain be set about with hideous steel railings and orange plastic crash barriers, festooned with notices about health and safety, and probably closed for the winter anyway. I've always thought our silly health-and-safety culture was an infection spreading from the United States. Not if Utah, Colorado or New Mexico are anything to go by. They treat you like adults here.

Colour code

Still, nowhere is immune from political correctness. Near Park City in Utah, on a day when the world seemed to have woken up beneath a 3ft

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blanket of the finest powder snow, I watched the two chatty women presenters who host the *Morning Mountain News* TV show introduce their programme. "Welcome," said the blonde one, "to white Wednesday!" "Well, not entirely," said her African-American co-host. Involuntarily, the blonde covered her face with her clutch of winning tickets for the daily quiz.

